

A VERY CHRISTMAS SWEET TOOTH

Christmas - I can write the word, but I can't say it - depresses me. For a trained and practicing psychiatrist to admit this is no small thing. My living Christmases tended to extravagance, as the modern materialistic version of the holiday goes, filled with expensive and unasked-for presents from my wealthy father. Perhaps he thought they would make up for his general lack of good parenting. They didn't. Anyway, Christmas brings family memories to mind, and I get morose, so I don't get out much. For the most part, I remain in the asylum, in which I work as an attending physician, straight through the holidays. My days I spend in the crypt underneath, rather than inside my coffin in the family mausoleum in the quiet company of my mother and father (quiet, because they're dead).

Those of you who have read my previous missives might point out that said asylum was once my childhood home. Yes, but for me, it was the person, not the place, that ruined the memories, and the person - my father, or what remains of him - is interred in the mausoleum. Also: quiet, you.

Fortunately, I have company beyond the asylum's usual motley crew of crazies. I don't count the nursing staff or the other psychiatrists. First, they're all technically my employees, although they don't know it, and the steadily-increasing "good will" and "cheer" that escalates after Thanksgiving has the opposite effect on me. No, my company is Bleak - a name, not a descriptor. (Well, yes, a descriptor too, but primarily a name.) Although he does suffer from psychiatric disease, he is most certainly not "usual."

"Mortimer Bleak" - I may as well refer to him by his pen name, since HIPAA laws prevent me from using his real one anyway - is a former literary professor, recent alcoholic, aspiring published poet, and current lycanthrope. He contracted his condition a few years back, and before I met him, he self-treated every month by getting so drunk for several days that he passed the full moon, and his physical change, in a stupor. I found him one night as I was coming back from one of the "human heme-aholics anonymous" meetings that I facilitate for others of my kind. I offered him private counseling - he's a very clinically-depressed man - and a safe, secure suite in the upper story of the asylum that I keep closed to patients and staff, where he can come to suffer through his change for three days every four weeks or so.

Our usual routine consists of Bleak's self-admission on the evening before his change begins. After this, we have a brief chat to make sure his pills are optimized, and I engage him in some talk therapy if I feel that it's warranted. Once our clinical activities are finished, we often research his extensive collection of old grimoires and compilations of folklore, looking for anything that might give a clue on how to rid him of his affliction. When said affliction begins in earnest, I medicate him and lock him in the old bedroom that I've had soundproofed and padded. Three nights later he emerges, reverted to his human form and with a guilt-free conscience, and we start over next month. This month, his change begins tonight, which also happens to be the night before Christmas.

So there we are, Bleak and I, on Christmas Eve just after dusk, in my father's old study adjacent to what Bleak calls the "changing room." I'm sitting in the cracked leather

recliner, feeling glum, and he's poring through an old tome he brought over from an antique bookseller he met online.

He looks up at me. "Cheer up, will you, Count Scrooge?" He opens his mouth and bares his teeth; he's sucked two small candy canes to sharp points and stuck them in his upper lips like fangs. (Yes, he knows what I am. In his case, full disclosure on my part was very valuable in developing a trusting doctor-patient relationship.)

"Har. Har." I am not amused.

"Humor is one of the mature defense mechanisms, after all." Bleak takes the candy canes out and crunches them to bits.

I meet his eyes with my psychiatrist's stare - thoughtful, slightly remote. "Why would you say that, Bleak? Do you feel defensive now?"

"What do you think?" He bares his teeth again. His canines are already slightly elongated.

Despite its depiction in film, the physiological changes that come over a lycanthrope can't occur in mere minutes. The body takes an entire day to grow hair coverage, lengthen and strengthen teeth and nails, and reshape the optic apparatus. This takes an enormous amount of cellular energy, which is why an unprepared lycanthrope develops such an appetite in his changed form (unfortunately for many a taker of late-night strolls under a full moon). Bleak has been eating energy bars and drinking high-calorie protein shakes all day, a precaution borne from his past experience, I'm sorry to say. He stretches his jaw. He doesn't complain, and his pain is alleviated by the Vicodin I prescribe him, but the change does hurt: imagine all the aches of puberty, condensed into a single twenty-four-hour period. As you might imagine, this exacerbates the feral, hungry state that remains the stereotype for sufferers of this particular condition. I can't truly say it isn't deserved.

"Instead of moping around, why don't you help me with these books?" says Bleak.

I sit there. "Antidepressants and counseling are my purview, not curse removal."

Bleak turns back to his text. "Fine, Pierce, but I never saw you as the type to wallow in teenage-style angst. Next time I'll be sure to bring plenty of glitter. You can sprinkle it all over your skin. I'll call you Doctor Sunny Sparkles."

The company really is helpful for me to keep from being mired in melancholy, but I still feel grumpy. "Am I not allowed to have emotions? Is that part of this job?"

He's unmoved by my grumbling. "Here, maybe you'll like my new verse."

"Ah! Elderly! Your wisdom could bring young men wealth and fame.

Alas, you cannot recollect your birthday or your name."

"You think dementia is humorous, do you?" I snarl. "Alzheimer's is a joke now, is it?"

Bleak shrugged. "It's the idiom of 'Mortimer Bleak.' It's my Book of Lamentations."

"Nope. No Bible stuff."

My pager goes off. I don't care for computerized contraptions, and I don't carry a cellular phone. The wireless nature of the bulky pager I insist on continuing to use makes me uneasy. My youthful physical appearance belies the fact that I am rightfully old-fashioned. I call the number back from the rotary telephone in the study and listen to the nurse who paged me from downstairs, then hang up, my interest piqued.

"So?" says Bleak.

"I've been asked to evaluate a girl for overnight admission to the asylum. She claims to be haunted by a ghost. According to the nurse, it sounds like an acute psychotic break on the road to full-blown schizophrenia, versus a drug-induced hallucination."

Bleak cocks his head - a very canine move, actually. "Or she could be haunted by a ghost."

I roll my eyes. "I'll be back as soon as I'm able."

"I'll come with you," says Bleak, shutting his book in a puff of dust. "I'm done here."

"I really can't..."

"Oh, I see. I suppose I'll leave AMA then."

"AMA" means "against medical advice." He's bluffing, but I relent and let him come. I consider making a comment about my dog following me wherever I go, but my professional mask is on now.

I meet the nurse, an older woman named Jan, outside the evaluation room. Jan is jaded and cynical. With her job, sometimes that armor is necessary.

"Female, seventeen, perseverating that she's 'haunted by a ghost.'" Jan gets to the point and hands me a patient folder.

"What kind of ghost?" asks Bleak. Jan looks at him askance. I thank her and wave her back to her station. Bleak probably shouldn't come in with me - let me amend that to "definitely is not allowed to" come in with me - but I don't want to leave him alone. I knock and enter, Bleak right behind.

The girl is slight, with dyed black hair and dark eyeliner. Her shirt is imprinted with the face of a cartoon cat. She's wearing some type of tutu/skirt hybrid, thigh-length leggings striped red and white like a candy cane, and black combat boots that appear to be made of some sort of plastic. So far, the diagnosis of schizophrenia is supported.

Schizophrenia, by the way, doesn't mean "multiple personalities," as is commonly misconceived. That condition is called, appropriately, "multiple personality disorder." Rather, schizophrenia is, basically, "crazy." Lots of different flavors. It's not important to get into.

The girl looks up at me with frantic eyes, like a trapped...well, cat, I suppose.

"Hi there. I'm Dr. Pierce. This is my assistant, Professor Bleak." I don't want to use his real name with her, since he's technically not supposed to be here. I smile at her, closed-mouth. My fangs are currently retracted, but it's a good habit. "What's your name?"

"Catherine, but I go by Kitten."

I raise an eyebrow. That was a concise, coherent answer without a hint of acute psychosis. "Okay, Kitten. What seems to be the problem tonight?"

"I keep telling you people! There's a ghost following me around! And I'm not crazy."

"A ghost on Christmas Eve!" says Bleak. "How very Christmas Carol!"

The girl is confused. "Like, 'You'll shoot your eye out?'"

"No, that's A Christmas Story," says Bleak. "I mean A Christmas Carol."

Realization sets upon her face. "Oh, the one with the Muppets."

Kitten is a cultural Philistine, but this little exchange demonstrates a definite sanity. So, why the "ghost" claim? A cry for attention? I make some notes on her chart.

"Pierce." Bleak tugs at my arm, ruining my penmanship. I look up. I drop the pen.

"See? I told you," Kitten tells us, hands on her hips. "I can't make it go away!"

There is indeed an apparition in the corner of the room. Its appearance is human, shadow-like, fading in and out, the visual equivalent of a radio station in flux between static and sound. The shadow-grey brightens into color for a moment. Hints of white break up a deep, full-bodied red that covers the figure almost entirely.

“Oh, come on now,” says Bleak. “Santa?”

“You really see it? Oh, thank you.” She sighs loudly.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was the ghost of *Santa Claus*?” I ask her. I’m losing my clinical comportment, but it won’t help the situation now anyway.

Kitten gives me that certain look of disdain that lies exclusively within the power of a teenager questioned by an authority figure.

“I don’t want anyone to think I’m crazy, do I?”

I look at Bleak, who tilts his head in a general upwards direction. I nod.

“Kitten, let’s go upstairs.”

In my father’s old study, the story comes out. Catherine - Kitten, rather - is enamored with the culture of death, in a certain pop-culture fashion. (Bleak explained to me that the term is “goth,” and that it explains Kitten’s odd clothing choices. I still don’t quite understand it all. He said I would be very popular with this particular subset of people. No, thank you.) Apparently, Kitten came into a possession of a “spellbook” through an anonymous online auction, which she took to be a facsimile only, but one that would support and enhance her self-identification and endear her to her peers. She opened it for the first time today, read from it, and was surprised to find that it actually worked. Thus, for the last two hours, she’s been followed by a specter that certainly matches the common representation of “Santa Claus.”

An aside: I appreciate the secularization of the holiday, but as a physician, I have a professional problem with the modern depiction of Santa Claus. Far removed from the “Saint Nicholas” and “Père Noël” of the rest of the world, the American version has its origin as a marketing symbol for soft drinks. Have you been good this year? Have some brand new diabetes! Have you been naughty? Here’s a stocking full of diabetes. A pleasant, jolly plumpness fueled by nonstop consumption of cookies? In the medical profession, we call that “morbid obesity.” That being said: I thank you, cola companies, for American blood is the sweetest, most glucose-laden in the world. In fact, some European and Japanese members of my kind refer to this country as “Candyland.”

Incidentally, Bleak, who is actually very conservative for a literary professor, dislikes Santa Claus for a different reason. “He’s a huge red - RED - overlord of an enslaved worker class,” he tells me, “who’s appointed himself sole, inscrutable arbiter of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for the entire world and distributes rewards and punishments accordingly. Da, comrade, ‘Merry Christmas!’ from Big Brother.”

Back to Kitten. While she relates her story, Bleak is paging through his books. “Look here,” he says. “It takes skill to bring up a specific spirit, like in First Samuel.”

Kitten and I look at him with blank stares.

“The witch of Endor? In the Bible, King Saul had a medium call up the spirit of the prophet Samuel. Since you - no offense, my girl - didn’t know what you were doing, your spell simply opened up a door for whatever spirit pushed itself to the front of the line, so to speak.”

“So is he from heaven, or from hell?” Kitten asks. “And anyway, how do you know all of this?”

Bleak, thank goodness, ignores the second question. "Technically, it's more like Paradise or Sheol. Probably Sheol, since in Paradise I doubt he would care about anything that's happening down here."

"Congratulations, Bleak," I say. "You just told a child that Santa belongs in hell." Here's another example of humor as a defensive mechanism. I feel - not viscerally, but cerebrally - sorry for this soul, if the Christian Bible is true and damned he is. I'm very much hoping this is not the case, however, because if so, I'm sure to join him one day.

"Well, it is an anagram of 'Satan,'" he replies. Bleak is such a word nerd.

"Look, obviously this is not really Santa Claus," I say, as if there were actually a Santa Claus. The specter flits in and out of view, but he shakes his head no in agreement. "He can't speak, but he's obviously troubled."

"Maybe he's a revenant," says Bleak. "If he has unfinished business here on earth, and we can accomplish it for him, he'll go away." He points me to a section of text, and I read it.

"According to this," I say, "an undirected raising spell will be drawn to a revenant whose passing occurred at roughly the same date and location, so our Santa's demise occurred near this time of the year, likely on December twenty-fourth, and in this general area, likely within city limits."

"Does all this sound right to you?" Kitten asks the specter. He nods yes.

"Then here's our plan," I say to the ghost Santa. "If you'll reappear outside, I'll follow you to where your trouble is. Bleak, you and Kitten keep looking for a back-up plan, just in case." With everyone in agreement, the specter dissipates and I head downstairs.

"Jan, I need to step out for a few minutes. Page me if there's an emergency."

"Where to, Doctor Pierce?" asks Jan.

I call over my shoulder. "I'm going to perform a holiday miracle."

"Holiday miracle." That really doesn't sound as good as "Christmas miracle." What a great line that would have been.

The ghost is waiting outside the asylum. He's not limited by physics, so he can go as fast as I can follow, which is very fast indeed. As soon as I catch up with him, he reappears at a farther point. Count Dracula was known to travel in this same manner at times, but that was a product of his sorcery, rather than a power inherent to my kind in general.

The specter leads to a drab, blocky building with a sign saying "Children's Home." It's an orphanage. The night is still young; the sun set only an hour ago. Lights and sounds denote an ongoing Christmas party. I jump the iron fence (literally, jump over) and crawl up the wall to the second-story window where the sound is the loudest. The spirit floats up with me, almost invisible in the dark. Inside, I see a decorated tree, a long series of fold-out tables set with desserts and punch, and a line of children waiting for a turn on the rent-a-Santa's lap, each conversation punctuated with a workmanlike "ho ho ho." Spirit-Santa is agitated.

I have enhanced senses. This includes the five classics, but some are stronger than others, and some are difficult to quantify. For example - and this is where so many of the modern stereotypes of my kind come from, which makes it a self-inflicted situation in many respects - I can smell lust on a person. It's on the fake Santa. He has a little girl on his lap, maybe ten years old. I hear him whisper, "I have a present just for you, if

you'll be my special helper." The specter hovering beside me begins to flicker like a light bulb about to pop, then disappears. I'm feeling a good deal of rage myself.

Among the many less-than-genuine identification documents I make it a habit to carry, I have a card that says I'm a Child Protective Services worker named "Gerald Reagan." I use this persona not infrequently in my day job (night job, rather), and I'm glad I have it now. I crawl down the wall and go around to the front door.

The woman who answers seems pleasant and invites me to enter when I explain what I'm doing there (which I lie about). Threshold crossed. I let her be the one to interrupt the current festivities; the line of children disperses to eat another treat or shake a present, and the fake Santa meets me in the doorway.

"Happy holidays! I'm terribly sorry to interrupt," I say with a smile, "but I'd like to ask you a few questions about a child you might have seen. It's nothing to do with you, of course, but you might be able to help. May we speak outside?"

"Buddy, I see a million kids a day," he says.

"This will only take a moment. Please."

He glances back, finding the little girl, assuring himself she's still there. I'm tempted to end him then, but I want to make sure that I also solve the revenant problem.

"Yeah, yeah, let's go, but let's make it snappy," he says.

"Of course. After you."

We walk outside to the cracked-asphalt lot, stopping under a light at the corner of the building. I grab his red polyester suit and toss him down the grassy strip along the building's unlit side. He gets up with a curse.

I stalk toward him, but he doesn't show any fear. He's a large man, portly but muscular, mid-forties. Spirit-Santa appears behind him and starts swinging his insubstantial fists. The real-fake-Santa sees me staring and turns around. "Whoa! What is this?"

The specter gestures angrily, flashing from misty grey to solid color. His red suit is stained deeper at his chest, and he points to beneath the fake Santa's pannus to the general area of his groin. I understand, and accuse fake Santa accordingly.

"It's clear enough what happened," I say. "Your colleague in the Santa game got wise to your pedophilic behavior, and you shut him up. Turn yourself in, or I will."

Santa pulls a knife and advances. He smells of sweat and liquor, and his bushy beard and long sleeves don't present me with any easily-accessible arteries, but I'm not here to feed. For a large human, he's faster than one might expect, but with me, that's nowhere near fast enough. I dodge, and my hand flies out.

As the conduit from the head to the body, the neck contains many anatomical communications which, if interrupted, can result in severe morbidity and mortality: the carotid and vertebral arteries, the jugular veins, the trachea, the esophagus, the spinal cord. When hanging was a preferred method of execution, any of these could come into play. A short drop meant a slow death by asphyxiation, as the noose forced the windpipe shut and cut off blood flow from the heart to the brain. A long drop could snap the spinal cord; long enough, and frank decapitation might occur.

The force of my strike and grip lifts fake Santa up and accomplishes most of the latter immediately, at least internally. One more quick squeeze, and I feel his first cervical vertebra pop up like a cork from a bottle.

The ghost-Santa smiles, closes its eyes, and appears to fall back, dissipating in a swirl of mist. The body of other Santa just lays there, and now I have to do something with it. Plus, I need to get back to Bleak and Kitten, but I need to do something else first.

From the dead Santa's head I grab the loose red cap, complete with white fur trim and topper, and go back inside the orphanage. I make apologies for Santa and tell the children that he gave me his hat and told me to finish up with the presents. (The Grinch has nothing on my Christmas Eve falsehoods.) I do, and I leave the children happy. I give the hat to the little girl. Outside, I pick up the body of Santa. The specter is nowhere to be found.

Since tonight is Christmas Eve, the city is as empty as it will ever be. I make my way to my family mausoleum, where my coffin currently sits empty. I deposit the Santa, whose corpulent corpse can barely fit inside, and replace the stone lid. Tomorrow I'll sneak him into the crematorium on the grounds (it'll be empty on Christmas Day, and I have a copy of the keys) and burn his body to ash. Feel free to insert a naughty/coal joke here. I greet my parents while I stuff him in. That's just good manners, especially on a holiday.

"Good evening, Mother and Father," I say, and I can't help adding, "I'll wager you weren't expecting a visit from Santa Claus tonight."

Back at the asylum, I tell Kitten the good news and warn her to leave spellcraft alone. She says thank you to both of us, and I discharge her in time to get a good night's sleep before tomorrow morning. At this point, Bleak is ready to settle in to his changing room. He hasn't had any luck with the new book, but despite his depression and gloomy affect, he's the perpetual optimist.

"Dracula could turn into a wolf," Bleak says. "Why don't you ever turn into a wolf with me? We can hang out."

"Beyond the fact that I have to work? Well, from the Harker lawyer's accounts of his own conversations, Dracula was a sorcerer descended from witches and shapechangers. I'm just infected."

Bleak smiles. "Me too. I guess we're related in a way, you and I."

I give him a sedative and he pops it in his mouth. He enters the changing room and I move to close the door. He yawns.

"Merry Christmas, Pierce."

I try to choke it out, but I can't. "Merry...Ex-mas, Bleak." I shut the door and lock it. It's good to have a friend at Christmas.

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